DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 013 RC 019 889

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TITLE Attention Deficit Disorder in Children and Adults: Strategies for Experiential Educators.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 7p.; In: Experiential Education: A Critical Resource for the 21st Century. Proceedings Manual of the Annual International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education (22nd, Austin, TX, November 3-6, 1994); see RC 019 884.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attention Deficit Disorders; *Coping; *Daily Living Skills; Experiential Learning; *Outdoor Education; Self Esteem; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Current research suggests that 5 percent of American children are affected by attention deficit disorder (ADD) and as many as 70 percent of them do not grow out of it in adolescence or adulthood. This paper aims to help outdoor and experiential educators understand how a person with ADD thinks and feels, and offers strategies for positively impacting behavior and social and emotional growth of students with ADD. Most people with ADD wrestle with self-esteem issues as a result of years of disapproval or ridicule from parents, teachers, and peers. By teaching survival skills, outdoor teachers can build student self-esteem based on accomplishment and a sense of independence. Praise is also important, but it should be awarded only to the extraordinary and to the things the student is proud of. Success for ADD kids depends upon having a clear mental picture of what excellence looks like. The outdoor leader must set the stage for successful activities by first having one person demonstrate and then leading a mini-debriefing that highlights goals and success factors. Other strategies for educators include avoiding timed activities and evaluations, challenging ADD students by giving extra assignments that require attention to detail, being aware of the ability of ADD persons to focus their attention totally (a trademark of ADD known as "hyperfocus"), and providing graceful transitions between activities. Additional resources on ADD are included. (SV)

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ED 377 013

Attention Deficit Disorder In Children And Adults: Strategies For Experiential Educators.

Marcia L. Conner

Education programs often use experiential techniques to help children and adults build trust and foster teamwork. This is especially important for children and adults with ADD who may not pick up on the subtle cues society presents on how to behave and learn. This session will help educators understand the way a person with ADD thinks and feels. With this information we can open new doors to learning and help people with ADD thrive in our attention dependent culture.

Day: Friday
Time: 12:15

Expanded Description

Attention Deficit Disorder in Children and Adults: Strategies for Experiential Educators

ADD (and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) is a neurobiological disorder characterized by restlessness, distractibility, and impulsiveness or dis-inhabition. The disorder becomes a disabling condition in situations when a person with ADD is expected to limit these behaviors and act like those with more control of their actions and words. Current research suggests that 5% of American children are affected by ADD and as many as 70% of them do not grow out of it when they reach adolescents or adulthood.

If you know what ADD looks like you may notice it wherever you go. Though it may be more prevalent in outdoor education arenas, because of the attraction of action-laden programs, you may also be seeing the outcome of the 90's "do it now" society. The myriad of new technologies and information tends to make us all a little restless, impulsive, and distractible. There is just so much we can process before our behavior changes and frustration or overload sets in.

Children and adults with ADD have to deal with their everyday processing problems and those of the society around them. No wonder more people are being diagnosed now than ever before. To help facilitate the needs of children and adults with ADD we need to education ourselves as to what is really going on. We need to know how we can positively affect behavior and grow those we work with socially as well as emotionally. Experiential and outdoor educators have the opportunity to be the people who finally break through and make the difference in the lives of children and adults with Attention Deficit Disorder.
I was diagnosed with this misunderstand disorder as I was trying to graduate from college. I had always known I was "different" and that school work never came easily for me despite the fact I was bright. I gravitated to the outdoors early on in hopes of catching up to the world around me. When I learned what it was that made me different I was able to help others, and finally make sense of my seemingly unusual life choices. Since my diagnosis I have worked with hundreds of children and adults who also feel "different" and found that there are coping skills and conditions that help us flourish. In this session I will outline the strategies that work well for us. I may also provide those of you with ADD some insight as to why you ended up in the field of experiential education. The two are natural friends. For more information on what causes ADD, how it is diagnosed or treated please refer to the recommended readings at the end of this document. I will cover them in the session but do not have room here.

Why Outdoors?

I became an outdoor educator before I was diagnosed with ADD. It was one of the smarter self-therapies I used trying to fit into a world where most work gets done within the confines of walls and while sitting on chairs. The open spaces, creative element and casual, come as you are/however you are, style definitely captured and held my attention.

CE 019 889

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In a canoe class I could seamlessly move between my own thoughts and the strokes of those I instructed. No one accused me of day dreaming or not listening. On a climb I could put my hyperactive energy to use to go a little higher than my muscle agreed to try. As a program leader I intuitively knew the needs of the novices in the group because I could vividly remember when I was in their place. It seemed as if I was always a novice at something and had to overcome new situations and stimuli. And the hyperactive one, found in almost every group, who drove the others a little nuts, I could identify with him and offer personal guideposts.

As adventure and challenge programs gain more acceptance in the ADD community, parents and doctors begin thinking about getting kids out of the house and into the woods. Those in the outdoor experiential education field need to reexamine their programs. We need to make changes to ensure we are developing skill without confining anyone by policies set up for a more structured set of participants. Use these kids' energies and creativity. Don't try to squelch them. Challenge them in new and exciting ways instead of sticking to business as usual. Try some of these techniques with those who don't have ADD. You may learn that everyone benefits.

Maintain and Enhance Self Esteem

Children and adults with ADD often come across as precocious, self assured and even cocky. You may be surprised to learn then that I have not met anyone with ADD who does not wrestle with self worth and self esteem issues. If you can show a child with ADD that you care, despite his or her foibles or antics, you may gain a loyal friend for life. Far too few people are willing to get past the inappropriateness.
Why do we have problems with self esteem, though?

Most people with ADD have above average intelligence. At some point in their life they knew that they were smart, maybe smarter than those around them, but someone (or many ones) said it wasn't true. There were the moms yelling, begging, or pleading to "clean up your room" or "come down to dinner on time" or "get dressed before the bus comes." Mothers who unknowingly conveyed disapproval, silently saying the children are problems, inconsiderate, or not willing to trying hard enough. There were dads who couldn't believe their sons still wet the bed or couldn't catch a fly ball. These fathers never realized that interesting birds and shiny blades of grass can be more captivating in the outfield than a game off in the distance. It wasn't that we weren't paying attention. We were paying attention to the wrong things.
Other parents and teachers thought "Maybe if he'd just make friends, everything would be better." But who wants to be friends with someone who doesn't seem to listen or can't focus, or comes across as opinionated, demanding, or bossy? What child is aware enough to know that his behavior is his silent way to gain some control over his own life? It has nothing to do with making friends.

So the cycle begins early and keeps coming. The words of ridicule and frustration never seems to end like "if only you'd pay attention" or "try a little harder." The "you're so stupid" or "what a spaz" play over in our minds throughout life until someone teaches us to reprogram the messages.

And that one teacher who sees the child's pain and offers praise on even the ugliest projects for their "creative merit" doesn't recognize that some projects mean more to the child than others. Glowing comments for the "easy" ones dilutes the value of all the praise. We need to be smarter about the way we enhance and build self esteem.

Provide Life Skills

We now know that self esteem does not come from simple or even constant praise. It is acquired independently by the self from knowing "I can do it." When times are tough "I can survive no matter what happens." "I am strong enough to get through."

When these kids know they can't even make it to the bus fully clothed or hit a singe on an easy pitch, listen to instructions and act on them, or get homework home, done, and back to the teacher, why would they believe that they have superior or even adequate coping skills? They have sunk themselves by observing their own lives.

No wonder we can turn them around by offering survival skills. How do you put up a tent, or better yet, what makes good shelter or sleeping conditions if a tent is not available? What berries or nuts are edible? What will make you itch if you rub it on your back side are great things to know. Forget the bus and the pop fly. Providing skills to these kids will allow them to know they can survive. With a little imagination they will also know they can make it if ever their mother throws them out or they get completely lost. That is not that far from the concerns of many of these kids.

What better way to say "you can do it" than by letting them know they can? No "good job" feels as good as waking up and knowing you did it!

Be warned, though. You'll have to put up with plenty of "I can't do it." or "Why do we have to do this?" and "This is dumb" that comes out these kids' mouths along the way. Do you think they're going to make it easy for you? Forget it. Nothing ever comes easily to us and we try to share that pain whenever we can. As many teachers have said to me and I'll say to you.. "I know you can do it. Just try a little harder."

Moreover, if you're going to praise, which I'd never discourage, praise only the extraordinary and the things the child is proud of, not the things you would be proud of. That usually means paying attention to things they are working hard to do. Your words will go far. Throw away lines like "good job" and "much better" or the dreaded "what an improvement." They lead to more frustration and questioning than good. Be careful.

Show What Success Looks Like

Parents often say things like "get dressed and come down for breakfast." When the child comes down sporting a t-shirt, pajama bottoms, maybe shoes, and proceeds to go play with Legos they get scolded for not doing what the parent had asked. But the child did put on clothes and did come downstairs. The child may think "What's the big deal?" The parent doesn't realize he or she left out the evaluation criteria. What may have been obvious to the non-ADD siblings was not evident to the child who processed the question literally and acted as he or she though was expected.

Outdoors you shouldn't leave out the goals and its criteria, either. There is the favorite "make camp" routine when most of the kids clear the area, set down the tarps, pitch the tents, unpack the gear, and start prepping for night fall. When you go searching you find the teen with ADD sitting under a tree playing with his flashlight. Most likely he didn't have a mental picture of what it would look like if he succeeded, even if this is not his first time. The last time he probably didn't notice. And how often do we debrief making camp so he learns for the following evening?

Too often we believe the experience is in the education without realizing that there are some expectations and milestones that have to be reached along the way.

Is the goal of the ropes course to feel the fear of being up there or actually getting to the other side? Portaging a canoe for me, even though I love the water, still means climbing on wet rocks. Getting the boat back in the water slips from my mind as often as I slip into the river. It doesn't take long for me to get distracted, much like these kids. Unless I'm hyperfocused it is next to impossible to sustain the thought of reaching the goal.

Having a clear mental picture of what excellence looks like can make all the difference. We can get that vision by being drawn a picture and having the leader point everything out. I'm not kidding. This works very well. When possible, have someone else go first and then lead a mini-debrief of what happened before others proceed, highlighting goals and success factors. This works even better because you allow time for questions and processing. You can even make a game of going over the obvious stuff, helping everyone think about the what you are working toward. Without setting the stage everyone may do the activity but not the most optimal way for learning or sharing or safety.

Take the time to show them specifically what being successful means and then show them what it looks like.

As an aside, keep in mind that the impulsive ones often volunteer to go first. The experience may turn out to be a thrill, but not the type of learning experience you'd hoped for. Plan ahead and select the order based on skills and the ability to learn from other's successes and mistakes. For some it just takes longer.

Avoid Timed Activities

One of the most frustrating parts of having ADD is what I describe as a lack of an internal alarm clock. If you ask a person with ADD to do something in 15 minutes, without the aide of a watch or a clock, I'd bet he couldn't nine times out of ten. The tenth would be luck, not learning. This greatly effects the way we interact.

Think of what it's like to sit in traffic in the rain with the distractions of cars all around you. Think of the patter of rain, squeaky wipers, bursts from horns, or construction hammers and emergency sirens. Together they can make it feel like you've been sitting in one place forever. Even ten minutes can feel like an hour. When the weather is beautiful and the road is clear you get home in no time, though. This inconsistency in our internal time clock is much like that of a person with ADD. The more distractions, the longer it seems like has gone by. The fewer distractions, the faster time flies.

Because of this, be leery of timing activities and please don't penalize a child for being late. Instead, let her know what success looks like and make sure there are as few distractions in her path as possible. You might even agree one-on-one to a system where she is the first to gather the group to go. That way she won't always be the last one ready.

Without realizing it, your time limits may even create another distraction. The child may keep wondering "How long has it been?" "Is time almost up?" "I'll never get this done on time" and sometimes "Why bother?" There is no value timing unless you want to cause frustration and self defeat. Ironically, studies have found that when tests like the SATs are given untimed to teens with ADD, they finish faster than when the limit is there. With less to think about, they can focus more attention on the task at hand. So if children with ADD can't figure out how to get to a destination, can't be given time limits, and we need to remove distractions along their path, how do we challenge them? I suggest you give them more to do. Offer extra assignments where they can put their attention to detail to good use. The key to success is in structure, motivation, and novelty, not frustration and butting heads with their areas of weakness.

Challenge Them

Ask a particularly rambunctious participant to be your back up safety guide, watching the course for any dangerous situations. Have another chart the path on the map and explain to the others where it is you are and plan to go. I have seen both techniques used very successfully. People with ADD have a heightened sense of awareness and are constantly processing many things at once. One of the hallmarks of ADD is the inability to screen out extraneous noises, sights, and smells. By giving the child credit for those talents and having them keep you informed of the surroundings can be very rewarding. Of course you, too, will monitor what is going on but their heightened senses can prove to be a welcome addition.

Many times people with ADD will want to be in charge and boss others around even when they don't have the authority. Take time to explain all that leadership involves and ask if they'd like to lead a project or excursion under your guidelines. Your overview of what makes a good leader should contain information on soliciting the opinions of others, defining structure and guidelines, explaining to the group why you are doing things, and that you have a clear picture of what it is we're working toward. Though the rest of the group may not like the idea at first (especially if they feel the one with ADD has dictated long enough) they may learn that he or she has some valid and creative ideas that work well when given a chance. They may also appreciate the one with ADD now being asked the questions instead of asking them of others without pause.

It is often more comfortable for people with ADD to be in charge than to follow others' rules and direction. Not only is the distraction of expectation gone, but control over your next move can be a very motivating force to help you think before you act. When there are not opportunities for leading, or when the child comes across as reserved, challenge them with novelty and variety. Instead of finding eight different leaves (which will inevitably end up resulting in the child finding something more interesting to do) have

them find a really unusual leaf or flower or rock. Then have them come back and explain why they think theirs is special. This can also reinforce and open discussion about the value of variety and uniqueness. Activities that involve (easily forgotten) numbers or assignment that are not captivating and energy consuming often may seem easy or routine but may also lead to extreme frustration. In this case, the aggravation may be your own. When faced with static or mundane activities people with ADD often find a way to fulfill their own interests and attention tanks. Don't be surprised if we wander off, not to return when expected. Once we're off the trail we may become captivated with a squirrel or become fixated on watching the water run from a creek. This magic moment may not be broken by even the loudest partner or persistent instructor.

Hyperfocus

For some unexplainable reason people who can be distracted by seemingly any sound or smell often also can tune out the world around them and become completely enthralled in their activities. This is not a blatant way to undermine your authority or a way to bug the rest of the group. We become mesmerized when the distractions seem to disappear and something becomes so clear and moving. It's sort of like the effect 3-D Magic Eye pictures have on some people. Once you see the mystery picture the vision captivates all of your attention. It is not until you are interrupted that you become aware again that the world is still spinning.

If you've only seen people with ADD flit from one activity to the next you may not even be aware that we can sustain attention on one thing. We so infrequently slow down enough to become absorbed in our surroundings that it is difficult to become hyperfocused. This type of focus is a trademark of ADD, though. In fact, parents often question doctors' and teachers' ADD assessments saying that their child can focus on an activity for hours. How can he have an attention problem? It is more accurately the inability to stop doing something that accompanies ADD. We have the inability to stop paying attention to the noises, or stop running around, or hitting, or being captivated by running water.

Provide Graceful Transitions

Moving out of hyperfocus to another activity, or asking the child to do something new or unexpected can also be very traumatic. Just as we begin to see "we can do it" the rules or surrounding sometimes change and we need to go through the awkward processing stage again. When a child is hyperfocused and you force them to change their focus they may become surprisingly angry or hostile. You've just taken from them one of the few joys they may feel, the ability to hyperfocus and turn off all that extraneous stimuli. Not that you've done anything you shouldn't have. Just be prepared for the occasional lashing out. The solution is finding something equally captivating to do next.

Fall back on the activities that enhance self-esteem, build life skills, have no artificial time limits, and challenge their unique skills. Our energy, creativity, persistence, and watchful eyes have the potential to make things very interesting. Your role is to provide coaching and mentoring. Challenge your own rules and directions and you'll find out that if when we accommodate those with ADD we serve everyone better. There is so much for us to learn. Why not start by paying attention to those who don't seem to?

Before concluding I must note that my emphasis here has been on those with noticeable restlessness and hyperactivity. Many children and adults with ADD do not outwardly exhibit high energy or activity levels. Some may even seem slow. Their distractibility and impulsivity may just surface more often than the restlessness. The strategies I've outlined work equally well for those with and without hyperactivity. Day dreamers and doodlers may not be causing trouble but have all the same difficulties processing information, staying on task and on time shared by the room runners. They may also become easily bored. By offering them structure, motivation, and variety you can provide the type of support no one may have provided them before. You may be the person who finally gets through and shows them all they can do.

For more information on ADD in both children and adults take a look at the following:

Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood through Adulthood. Edward Hallowell, MD & John Ratey, MD. Pantheon Books. ISBN 0-679-42177-7. 1994.

Your Hyperactive Child: A Parent's Guide to Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder. Barbara Ingersoll, Ph.D. Doubeday, 1988. ISBN 0-385-24070-8.

You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?! A Self-Help Book for Adults With Attention Deficit Disorder. Kate Kelly and Peggy Ramundo. Tyrell & Jerem Press, 1993. ISBN 1-882522-00-1.

Attention Deficit Disorder: A Different Perception. By Thom Hartmann. Underwood-Miller, 1993.

How difficult can this be? The F.A.T. City Workshop: (Video) By Richard LaVoie at the Eagle Hill School. Available from PBS television at 800-424-7963 or the ADD Warehouse at 800-233-9273.

To find ADD support groups in your area call the National offices of Children and Adults with ADD (Ch.A.D.D.) at 315-587-3700. Your local group will be able to offer suggestions for doctors in the area who specialize in diagnosing and treating people with ADD.